

Engaged Leadership for Urban Education: Explorations of Equity and Difference in Urban Communities

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Special Issue Editors

This special issue presents six cases that take up a central theme: contemporary leadership in urban education demands new ways of thinking, understanding, and acting in order to disrupt patterns that subvert and marginalize the knowledge and experiences of communities of color. The stakes of not listening, not acting, and not forging and leveraging new knowledge systems, rooted in the authentic experiences and perspectives of African America, Latina/o, and Asian children, seems to heighten almost daily. The failed colorblind policies and ways of operating within social institutions have not made racism go away (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Leonardo, 2009), though there are certainly large segments of (White) society that would deny culpability in perpetuating racist structures (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2015).

In particular, it is important to provide images of, and make concrete, the ways in which leaders' ability to conceptualize schools as racialized spaces impacts the experiences of children and adults of color in school buildings. Accordingly, how are children affected by educational leaders' (in)ability to understand and address the ways in which schools function to systematically marginalize, exclude, or degrade children and families of color? How are schools nurturing sites where staff of color can thrive and support children who reflect various ethnic, racial, and linguistic communities in meaningful ways? As is evidenced in the cases, an inability to understand the myriad ways in which Whiteness and institutional racism manifest in schools

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effectively contributes to emotional and psychological distress for Black, Brown, and Asian children.

The authors of these cases are specifically focused on educational leadership for urban schools and the children these schools serve. In addition to serving large proportions of students of color and those living in poverty (Milner & Lomotey, 2014), urban education has been on the receiving end of a litany of assaults - all inherently political - that cast them as “failing” (Glass & Berliner, 2014), a process that tends to galvanize society’s perception of these communities as being deficient, or abnormal, in many ways (Valencia, 2010). In addition, neoliberal and race-based politics tend to be more intense in urban contexts, especially as cities aggressively pursue ways to re-define themselves, become more attractive to (White) professionals and corporations, and, consequently, gentrify and displace people of color (Lipman, 2013). Layered into urban contexts and schools, we must also remember, are troubling histories of subtle and not-so-subtle racism, an intense competition for resources, and an increasingly heavy reliance of private money to fund “public” projects and services (Farmer & Poulos, 2013). The compilation of these factors - especially the latter - creates urban political contexts that can look more like local oligarchies than local democracies. In response to this, the struggle for organic, community-based decision making seems endless. In broad strokes, then, this is the context within which these cases are situated.

In order to extract the richness and depth of the issues raised in these cases, it might be helpful to invoke an ecological perspective of educational leadership (Beale-Spencer, 2006). By ecological, we intend to depict a complex social milieu that accounts for the confluence of interacting, social dynamics that create a particular system and involves many distinct actors

serving various roles, who represent significantly differential statuses and power. Akin to an activity system (Engstrom, 1999), an ecological framework in education highlights the multiple, interacting social dimensions of schools, including teachers' interactions with children, parent relationship with schools and advocacy, teacher-school leadership interactions, professional development, teacher and leadership education, policy- and decision-making processes, and community influences. Each of these social dimensions must be considered and incorporated in order to make radical and meaningful shifts in urban school culture and experiences for children. This also involves broadening notions of *educational leadership* to include teachers' work, parents' knowledge and involvement, and community activism.

At the same time, we must consider the multiple levels of interactions that lead to marginalizing or oppressive experiences for kids of color in schools, with acute attention on classroom-based interactions and leaders' responsibility to understand and address these in systematic ways. Thus, the notion of listening to marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005) might be useful in guiding readers through the cases and to underscore the myriad ways whiteness and deficit notions of children and families manifest in harmful interactions and paralyze efforts for substantial change to unfold.

As a final note, we wanted to highlight our intentional use of the adjective *engaged* in the title. By engaged, we mean to emphasize the necessary process of struggle with complex issues and dominant frames of references and ways of thinking that never have served well children of color and continue not to serve them well today. Inspired by the visionary work of Gloria Anzaldua (1987), we see engagement of this kind similar to the state of uncertainty, or not belonging, that she describes as *Nepantla*. One might also draw a parallel to Dr. Martin

Luther King's notion of maladjustment (1963). The moment that we become settled, representations of situations become clear, or our answers or responses come easily and immediately, we must make an effort to step away and listen to colleagues, constituents, or stakeholders – particularly those who experience oppression and marginalization – in order to restructure our understandings and avoid acting out of self-interest, self-preservation, or whiteness, or opting for the path of least resistance that inevitably perpetuates the status quo.

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